

July 3, 2007

The town of Coupeville has reviewed its Shoreline Master Program, and is proposing to amend that program. The amendments have to be reviewed the the Department of Ecology. Ms Betty Renkor is the person at Ecology who will be doing the reviewing. This letter comes from WEAN board member Ann Dannhauer, commenting to Ms Renkor about the SMP.

Most of the SMP is good stuff which all of us can support. The one sticking point is a change to allow construction over the water of new businesses which are not water dependent. Ann's letter lays out very clearly why this is a bad idea:

Dear Ms. Renkor:

In my opinion, the Coupeville Shoreline Master Program (SMP) should classify the existing overwater structures as non-conforming. This would best fulfill the requirements of the Shoreline Management Act (SMA) and of Coupeville's Comprehensive Plan, and would best preserve the historic integrity of Coupeville.

Classifying the existing structures as conforming, on the other hand, would encourage development of the vacant parcels on the waterfront, would promote the destruction and replacement of existing buildings, and would "dilute" the historical significance of the existing waterfront.

It could also result in significant cumulative impacts, especially by serving as a precedent for other towns' SMPs

The SMA encourages water-dependent over water-enjoyment uses. According to WAC 173-26-241: "Non-water dependent commercial uses should not be allowed over water except in existing structures of in the limited instances where they are auxiliary to and necessary in support of water dependent uses." None of the uses of new buildings being proposed are water-dependent.

The SMA has the purpose of protecting shoreline natural resources, including land and its vegetation and wildlife, and the water of the state and their aquatic life.

New overwater development would require the removal of vegetation, thereby promoting erosion and destroying habitat. The shade provided by trees helps prevent the desiccation of forage fish eggs. Overwater structures, on the other hand, provide shade over the water (which can affect juvenile salmon migration). The shade also has the potential of destroying eelgrass, important for forage fish habitat and sheltering juvenile salmon. Areas on Coupeville's shoreline (e.g.

Captain Coupe Park) are known for spawning smelt and support eelgrass beds (Getting to the Water's Edge, p.44). Whidbey Island is located "on the migration corridors used by salmon from nearly all of Puget Sound's major river systems" (Getting to the Water's Edge, p. 45). According to DNR monitoring, a decline in eelgrass have taken place in the Saratoga-Whidbey region (State of the Sound 2007, p. 60). The maintenance of overwater construction can also result in water pollution, for example, with metal particulates, paint, detergent, and cement.

Overwater development not only contributes to bluff erosion, but often requires armoring as the shore erodes, thus leading to further loss of land ("Mitigating Shore erosion Along Sheltered Coasts," Ocean Studies Board, 2007). Coupeville's shoreline erosion and bluff stability have long been a concern of the town (Coupeville Waterfront Study, 1982). In fact, the constant erosion of the Front Street bluff has caused the moving back of Front Street east of Main, has caused the Captain thomas Coupe house to be moved back twice, and at least 2 houses have fallen over the bluff (How Coupeville Grew, p. 31) This problem will likely increase with time, because sea levels are expected to rise anywhere from 4 to 35 inches during this century, with perhaps an additional 8 inches in coastal waters (State of the Sound 2007, p. 84)

Another purpose of the SMA is to promote public access.

New overwater development development would block views of the water and could inhibit beach access. Though the proposed Coupeville SMP allows for view mitigation (Shoreline Use, Historical and Future Use, p. 12) , the downtown area is where most townspeople and tourists congregate along the shoreline. Access to the beach could certainly be provided without necessitating a new building, and in fact, the shoreline is accessible in very nearby areas.

The proposed Coupeville SMP also does not fulfill the goals of the town's Comprehensive Plan. For example, Goal 6 of the Comp Plan is "to protect significant natural landscape features," including the goal to "seek to retain as open space wetlands, shorelines, and other areas that provide essential habitat for endangered or threatened plant or wildlife species" and "work with the State and County to develop programs to reduce erosion of the shoreline and to preserve and maintain the natural condition of Penn Cove." (Town of Coupeville Comprehensive Plan, revised 9/00, p. 24) The Comprehensive Plan also states that "views of water. . are particularly important in Coupeville" (p. 82)

Preserving the historic integrity of Coupeville is also an important part of Coupeville's Comprehensive Plan.

The second oldest town in Wa, Coupeville has the greatest concentration of

historic buildings in the state (Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve Vol 1 p. 62) and is part of Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve. The historic commercial district is where the historic character of Coupeville is most apparent (Coupeville Comprehensive Plan, p. 83)

Paradoxically, making the buildings along the waterfront non-conforming may be the best way to preserve them. The "grandfathering laws" could perhaps be strengthened, in recognition of the existing buildings' historic significance. In Coupeville's proposed SMP the town planner suggests modifying #8 of WAC 173 27 080 to allow restoration and reconstruction of historic structures in the event of partial or total destruction exceeding 75% of the replacement cost of the original development (Summary of Key Points, p. 1). Perhaps also the time limits delineated in #9 could be expanded.

Allowing new development, on the other hand, could discourage preservation of the old. The upkeep of historic buildings can be expensive, and it may be less expensive to demolish and build anew. Coupeville has not yet adopted a Historic Preservation Plan, and the demolition code is weak. The county lack an adequate demolition ordinance (Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve Vol. 1 p. 4), and the Town demolition ordinance allows for loopholes. Recently, a historic house was demolished and was exempted from the requirement to examine alternatives to demolition because of economic hardship in restoring the home. The town planner also argued that because two modern homes were built next to the nearly 100 year old house, the home's historic significance had changed (Whidbey News Times, 4/11/07)

New development would also have the effect of "diluting" the town's historic character. Whereas the Comprehensive Plan encourages new buildings to be compatible with nearby older buildings in terms of size and general appearance (p. 97), the Design Review Board has advisory capacity only. If new buildings are encouraged, and old can easily be demolished and replaced with new, the historic significance of Front Street will soon change. Coupeville has real history; it is not Disneyland.

The arguments made by the town planner in Shoreline Use - Historical and future Uses can be debated.

The planner has argued that "water related uses were not a significant component of the Town's historical fabric" (Shoreline Use - Historical and Future Uses, p. 1) On the contrary, transportation to Whidbey Island was originally only by water. Penn Cove was important in lumber milling and shipbuilding. Coupeville was an important port for the "mosquito fleet." At least 3 wharves in addition to the existing one were known to be on the waterfront, and the demolition of the wharves accounts for the gaps seen along Front Street (How Coupeville Grew, p. 27).

The commercial center of the town shifted as highways were constructed and travel by car superseded maritime travel.

I disagree with the second part of the planner's assertion that "one of the principle goals of the SMP and the Town's Comprehensive Plan is to protect this vernacular landscape by allowing adaptive reuse of shoreline structures and construction of new complimentary [sic] structures along the shoreline" (Shoreline Use - Historical and Future Uses, p. 5)

Another concern raised by Coupeville's proposed SMP is its potential effect on cumulative impacts. A primary purpose of the SMA is "to prevent the inherent harm in an uncoordinated and piecemeal development of the state's shorelines" (RCW 90.58.020). It is also to recognize and protect the statewide interest over local interest (WAC 173-26-181). Cumulative impacts are addressed in SMA section on the granting of conditional use permits (WAC 173-27-160), in which it is stated "in the granting of conditional use permits, consideration shall be given to the cumulative impact of additional requests for like actions in the area."

Allowing new overwater development in the 3 remaining undeveloped parcels north of Front Street may not in itself have a significant impact on Penn Cove's ecology or on the public's enjoyment of the shoreline. However, as other towns and cities adopt their SMPs they will look to previously approved SMPs as guidelines. (As an example, the proposed Coupeville plan quotes from Port Townsend's [Key Points, p. 1 and 3.]) Many of these municipalities may have historically allowed overwater, non-water dependent uses. However, historically, the state did not have a declining salmon population, endangered orcas, or a human population growth in the Puget Sound area of over 50,000 per year.

Sincerely,

Ann Dannhauer, MD